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# The Christian News-Letter

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**NEWS-LETTER**

CHRISTIAN FAITH AND WORLD EVENTS

**SUPPLEMENT**

MAN AND TECHNICS—WHITHER

BY PROFESSOR EMIL BRUNNER

THE BREAKDOWN last month of the Foreign Ministers' Conference has removed for the present any hope of a peace settlement either for Germany or for Austria by agreement between the four Powers. The first ingredient in a Christian attitude to the world situation, which this breakdown unmasks rather than creates, is to look it in the face without fear and without underestimating its seriousness. The people of Germany and Austria go on in doubt and uncertainty: Europe is divided: the world is divided: the possibility of a violent outcome is brought a long step nearer. Let's face it all.

## PERSONAL LIVING AND WORLD EVENTS

No doubt ninety-nine per cent of readers of the News-Letter, and of the people in this country in general, will do exactly the same things in 1948 as they would have done if the Foreign Ministers' Conference had been an unexpected and remarkable success. But there are two quite different attitudes of mind in which we can go about our tasks. We may push unpleasant realities out of our consciousness, concentrating all attention on the immediate jobs in hand, and refusing to think about the final disaster until it actually arrives. The other attitude, which we want in the coming year with the help of our readers to explore in the Christian

News-Letter, is more challenging and more difficult to describe. It refuses to believe that life consists of two spheres, separate and autonomous—one consisting of those concerns that are at least partly under our personal control in family life, neighbourhood, daily work and national affairs, and the other of impersonal forces beyond human control, which we may call fate or the flux of history or the working out of economic necessity and which may at any moment erupt into our little personal world and destroy it. On this view the division of Europe, and with it of the whole world, into two opposing camps is not simply the inevitable result of impersonal forces at work in history; what has taken place has come in very large part out of the hearts of men. The world of great historical events, where civilizations meet and clash, and where men are caught in the inescapable working out of other men's decisions, is in its own way, no less than the family and the small personal group, the field of moral responsibility. For the Christian this is bound up with the further belief that all the affairs of men are under the sovereign will of God, and if they are, the world of personal relations and the world of historic events are made of the same stuff: the results of human sin work themselves out in both, and the mercy of God extends over both. The breakdown of a marriage and the breakdown of a foreign ministers' conference do not belong to two different worlds: each contains given and inescapable elements of heredity and environment and each contains a field of moral responsibility, and this is not altered by the fact that vast numbers of men, some long dead, may have had a share in the collapse of negotiations round the table in London.

It is at once evident what difficult, profound and far-reaching questions about God's sovereignty and about man's moral responsibility are opened up by these bare assertions—questions which have perplexed the Christian mind from the beginning. In every generation they have to be asked anew. An age which refuses to wrestle with them is not really living, because it is evading the ultimate questions of life, and living in the shallows of thought and being.

Perhaps, if we were able to see in true perspective the human predicament of which the breakdown of the Foreign Ministers' Conference is one manifestation, we should feel that the deepest reason for concern about the world at present is not famine, or ruined cities or deserted conference tables, but its atheism. In saying this we are thinking not primarily of the atheism of Russia but of the atheism of the West. But as soon as the word atheism is used, certain concepts rise before the mind's eye—pictures of the men of the Enlightenment and of the age of science who, in the name of reason, progress and man's immense and growing powers, denied God, mocked at miracles, attacked the historicity of the gospels, and explained belief by explaining it away. This was an atheism springing from the intellect and it could be grappled with intellectually because it stated something that could be denied or argued against. In so far as God and men's idea of God are not the same thing, this kind of atheism often contained a truth in the form of a rejection of a false idea of God, which might be a necessary stage on the way back to God. That there are plenty of atheists of this kind in the world is plain enough, and it must be said that some of the most significant advances of the Gospel have been made in recent years among intellectuals who have discovered the ultimate bankruptcy of atheism and have turned back towards faith.

In saying that the real tragedy of the modern age is its atheism, it is not primarily this kind of intellectual atheism with its urgent search for truth and its repudiation of shams which ought to occupy the main attention of Christians today. The new thing in the world is what may be called a practical atheism rampant among people who would never call themselves intellectuals. In commenting on the Mass Observation Survey, *Puzzled People*, in C.N-L. No. 295, mention was made of the very large number of people who regarded the Ten Commandments as idealistic precepts which it was impossible for men to obey. This fact is of the greatest significance, for it means that countless men and women have given up believing in a world in which truth and goodness exist and are discoverable and realizable and have

substituted for it a cynical view that truth and goodness are undiscoverable and do not matter much—which is a practical form of atheism. If men believe this then they are logical in making the further step and saying that there is no moral responsibility upon men to seek truth or goodness. The results of this attitude of mind are to be seen on every hand. Atheism—life without God—percolating to ever-widening circles of people has done two things: it has handed men over as a prey to despair because it robs them of the belief that in seeking justice, fair dealing, toleration and freedom, they are reaching out to something real and therefore discoverable in the universe. In the second place it flings on the shoulders of men the herculean endeavour to create out of nothing, or rather out of the conflicting wills and opinions of men, conceptions of truth and justice which can command their allegiance and respect. There is a world of difference between seeking the truth and trying to make it.

In this which we believe to be the fundamental crisis of mankind to-day there are two tasks to which Christians have to address themselves. The first is to see the acute danger of allowing the Gospel to be regarded merely as a useful guide for personal living. If men come to believe that the world is under the governance of chance, necessity and fate, they will not for long be able to sustain the belief that in their personal lives they are moral beings. Their world view will smash up their personal faith: the cost of moral endeavour and obligation are too high to be worth while if the cosmic forces working against them are so powerful. Christians must, therefore, understand afresh and make visible to others their belief in a coherent world view in which moral purpose is sovereign: they must make explicit the fact that Christianity offers a framework of thinking, a total world view, and is thus in unceasing conflict with the modern outlook—a conflict which exists not only in society, but in the breasts of intelligent Christians, who are inescapably men and women of the twentieth century. If that conflict between two sharply opposed views of the world is ever to be overcome (and it will be the work of many years) then the presuppositions, principles and practical

implications of the two contending views must be understood. For the one view this understanding is largely in being since it has been a main task of modern philosophy to work out the presuppositions and principles of the modern scientific outook. A comparable exposition of a Christian world view which takes account of present realities is not yet in existence.

The second task is to discern, understand and further the movements in the secular thought and life of our time in which men are becoming increasingly aware that attempts to find a meaning for man's existence in terms of the world of time and space and of man's self-chosen purposes and activities just won't make sense. Much that is significant is already happening in this field, as for example, Professor Michael Polanyi's Riddell Lectures, *Science, Faith and Society*,[1] in which a leading scientist maintains that the whole scientific movement is ultimately based on faith in a transcendent spiritual reality and on adherence to a society committed to belief in the reality of truth and dedicated to the service of its discovery. Or in the field of politics, we may take the survey of the international situation by Sir Harold Butler, which has just appeared under the title *Peace or Power*.[2] He sees that the crucial problem in the political sphere is the reconciliation of the claims of the individual and society, of equality and freedom. But he sees clearly also that there can be no solution of these political problems and no basis for peace apart from something more fundamental. "Without a passion for truth, justice and liberty for their own sakes, with a deep respect for the rights of others, without charity and toleration in every relation of life, there can be no final reconciliation of the conflicting motives now pulling society apart." The final question which he leaves unanswered is where the faith can be found that will reanimate these ancient virtues.

What God means in human experience, how He reigns and guides human history—these are, as we said earlier, *the*

[1] Oxford University Press, 1946. 3s. 6d.

[2] Faber and Faber. 1947. 15s.

questions which every age must ask itself anew. The trouble is that they have receded to the circumference of men's thoughts. They are not even in the centre of the consciousness of many Christians, but they must be put there if Christianity is to fulfil its evangelizing mission in these days. Because we believe these issues to be of overruling importance we intend that the News-Letter shall give them serious attention in the coming year. Its contribution can at the best be infinitesimal. But for what it is worth that contribution will be made. We are planning for a number of Supplements, which will show more clearly what is involved in the twofold task of which we have spoken.

**THE SUPPLEMENT**

The Supplement in this issue is by Professor Emil Brunner of Zurich. He and Professor Karl Barth are the two outstanding theologians on the continent, and the influence of their thought has made itself felt all over the world. Professor Brunner is at present delivering the Gifford Lectures at St. Andrew's. He has been all along concerned to relate his theological thinking to the activities and problems of the lay world. The importance which he attaches to this is brought out in his latest book to be published in English, *Revelation and Reason*, where he makes a specific appreciative reference to the type of activities undertaken by the Christian Frontier. The Supplement is an address (unavoidably and regrettably abbreviated), which he gave recently to a Union of Technicians in Stockholm. It is not often that a Christian theologian has the opportunity of addressing that kind of audience. That Professor Brunner should travel from Switzerland to Stockholm for this particular purpose is a fact of interest. The subject has also a special interest, because the third of four Commissions preparing for the first Assembly of the World Council of Churches has as its central theme the problems created by a technical civilization.

Kathleen Bliss

# MAN AND TECHNICS—WHITHER?

An address to the Union of Technicians at Stockholm

**By PROFESSOR EMIL BRUNNER**

It is not so long ago that the older among us cannot remember the time when the question "Man and Technics—Whither?" would have been answered with a confident smile: "Towards ever increasing progress." It was on technics in its connection with science that the confidence in progress of recent generations was primarily based. Anyone who to-day gave the same answer would be regarded as someone who had been asleep for a whole generation. If the question is asked to-day, in place of a confident smile it arouses a feeling of trouble and acute perplexity, as though one were to say, "Who can know where this crazy journey will end? Who can know whether the immediate future may not be the end of everything—the abyss?"

If we ask how there can have come about in so short a space of time so radical a reversal from optimism to pessimism, we need only point to one or two dates which are known to everyone—the outbreak of the first world war in 1914, the totalitarian revolutions of 1917 and 1933, the second world war, and finally Hiroshima. Since then mankind feels that in the most literal sense it is no longer sure of its life. Indeed to-day, it is no longer, as formerly, sectarian preachers or street evangelists, but the leading men of science, the atomic physicists, who set before us these apocalyptic pictures of human catastrophe as a result of the misuse of our newly won control of atomic energy. Men have developed technics to a point at which the possibility of racial suicide within a short span of time has already become an alternative which political realism has to face. It would, however, be a mistaken view of our actual situation if we were to concentrate our attention on this extreme and final outcome. The atom bomb is, so to speak, only the Z of a long alphabet of the facts of our historical development which leads in the end to this Z. We must as far as possible trace things back to the A B C of the development.

It must be remembered that although technics is as old as man himself, beginning with the stone tools of the cavemen, and though much of its development has been relatively gradual and continuous, the development curve about two hundred years ago became suddenly steep and ever steeper, so that one can say that the revolution resulting from technics has in the last two hundred years been greater than all other changes from the period of the caveman until James Watt. As a result of this modern technical development, the power of man over nature has increased, as it were overnight, a thousand or a million fold—and not only the power of man over nature but also the power of man over men. We are thus confronted with a question to which technics itself has no answer—the question of what is to happen with this power, and how it can be integrated with human life in a meaningful way. It now seems as though this question may have been posed too late. Technics has already developed in a way which makes its meaningful integration with human life seem at the present time impossible. That is the meaning of the bomb that was dropped at Hiroshima. Man is able to control nature but no longer to control technics.

What has taken place in the last two hundred years can be expressed, perhaps in three propositions :

(1) The fascination exercised by the frantic pace of technical development has brought it about that man—modern man, the man of the technical age—no longer regards technics as a means but as an end. He believes that technics carries its meaning in itself.

(2) The concentration of interest on technics, that is, on the production of means, has allowed the sense for what is really purposeful and meaningful to become obscured and to atrophy. It is no longer merely what one might regard as a passing or acute illness, but a chronic disease. The man of the technical age is in many instances no longer capable of distinguishing between ends and means. The sense for what is an end in itself has been lost.

(3) Just as the second of these dangers is greater than the first, so the third is the most dangerous of all, namely, what may be called a quite fatuous confidence in technics and science, that is

to say, in what means can achieve for human life. Technics has become a god or rather an idol. There are many to-day who can repeat whole-heartedly what was written some years ago in a German newspaper, " the machine is our saviour."

If we have rightly described the phenomenon in the foregoing propositions, it is not the technicians or the scientists as such who are to blame for this development, but man himself. It is not technics that is the evil, but the failure to integrate technics in the total meaning of human life.

It follows also that it is impossible to understand the whole crisis merely as growing pains. It is tempting to say that there is nothing to be surprised at in the fact that things are as they are ; that the moral and human sides of man's development have not kept pace with this revolutionary speed of technical advance, and that there has not been time yet to assimilate technics ethically and socially. That, of course, is true. Unfortunately the tempo of technical development is not only not slowed down but on the contrary still further intensified. Men no longer merely make technical discoveries ; they have learned the technique of making discoveries. It is, therefore, vain to talk about a slowing down of the tempo which would allow the neglected social and ethical adaptation to be made good.

But, more fundamentally, this view of the matter is entirely mistaken, since it treats cause as effect and effect as cause. It is not technics that has created the modern man. He was there before technics came into existence. Men wanted technics before they obtained it. They wanted it, and believed in it in an unconditional sense, before it came into being. One can see this, for example, in the most famous figure in the fiction of the age that was destined to produce technics though it did not yet have it. I mean Robinson Crusoe. One can compare Robinson Crusoe with his companion in adventure and suffering Ulysses. How different is not only their ultimate fate, but their attitude to a fate that was to begin with so similar. Robinson Crusoe is technically not more capable than Ulysses. He lived before the time of revolutionary technical development. The most important technical difference between them is that Robinson Crusoe knew the use of gunpowder. But the essential thing is the fundamental difference in attitude. In complete contrast with

Ulysses Robinson Crusoe on his island sets technically to work and proceeds step by step with the means at his disposal to subdue nature. It is precisely this experience of man unintermittently maintaining himself in his natural surroundings that is the content and point of the narrative. The portrayal is of a man who knows unquestionably how to help himself, that is, of a genuinely technical man.

## THE SPIRITUAL ROOTS

Behind the technical development of the last two hundred years lies a much deeper spiritual process which begins at least two hundred years earlier—the process which we are accustomed to call the spiritual movement of the Renaissance or, to speak more exactly, that element in the Renaissance movement which contains the germ of the modern technical man. What took place at this deeper level I may again characterize more precisely with three ideas, or pairs of ideas—freedom without bonds, creativeness without responsibility, power without reverence.

(1) One of the moving forces in the modern period is a striving after freedom. We are rightly proud of this. It must be noted, however, that this freedom from the very beginning, although perhaps not at the first with complete clearness, was understood as independence—unconditional absolute independence. It is this independence in an unconditional sense which finds perhaps its clearest expression in the saying of Karl Marx that man is only free when he owes his existence to himself. This movement for freedom consequently is an emancipation not only from the fetters of political or ecclesiastical absolutism but, in its ultimate meaning, from God Himself. This was what Marx intended. In order to be free a man must cast off his belief in God, since to believe in God is to be dependent.

(2) A second feature of the movement of the spirit which began with the Renaissance is the elevation of the creative man as the final criterion. The man of genius, the creative man, is the real man. If creativity is the essential thing, then room must be made for the creative man, and everything else, including morality and responsibility, must be subordinated to the creative faculty. To the genius everything is permissible which helps

him to produce. But creativity need not be understood solely as the spiritual production of genius. The cult of creativity may become in its more superficial forms the cult of material production, of productivity as such. Production becomes the true content of human existence.

(3) The third element, which again is the deepest and most dangerous of all, is the elevation of the strong man to being an end in himself. The will to power was the programme of modern man long before Neitzsche gave expression to it. Men wanted first of all to have power over nature—a power that would make them independent of it. They wanted to free themselves from their dependence, and in order to do that they must have power. This will to power is a kind of religious passion, a passionate will to self-salvation.

These are the deep forces which gave to technics, and also to the new natural sciences, both a prodigious stimulus and also that direction which has to-day suddenly confronted us with a terrifying problem. Technics has been cut free from the moral and religious context of human life and has become autonomous because its deepest motive was the desire for autonomy on the part of man. From this point of view we can understand why technics acquired such a speed of development and why the tempo was not moderated in order to allow the necessary social adaptations to take place. The truth is that the furious revolutionary development of technics took place in a period which was very little in a condition to digest, if I may use the expression, socially and morally so large a mass of changes. It was not able, that is to say, to bring about the social adaptations and modifications which were necessary, if technics were not to become a danger for the life of man.

Counteracting moral forces were not, indeed, entirely lacking. One need only recall the way in which the grave abuses resulting from industrialism in the period of high capitalism were progressively mitigated by protective legislation for the workers, by the trades union movement and other humanizing forces. But all these counter-influences proved to be quite insufficient, not merely because the tempo of the technical development was so furious but because, for the same reason that made it such, mankind had suffered a loss of moral substance. The foundations

of the traditional Christian morality began in this period to be seriously shaken, and in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries this attained the dimensions of a rapid collapse. It is little wonder that at the end of this movement there should stand a technics which is no longer in a position to ask what is beneficial and what is harmful, what is humane and what is inhumane, a technics which develops autonomously contrary to the will of men.

## THE NEED AND MEANING OF CONVERSION

I hope that I have now filled in at least some of the A B C letters of the long chain of development of which the atom bomb is the final letter Z. But this analysis of the past cannot be an end in itself. We have undertaken it in order to understand better what is meant when the warning voices of the men of science call us to conversion.

This call to conversion has certainly in the first instance an immediate reference to the sphere of politics. The scientists wanted to conjure away the immediate danger to the life of mankind, by trying to have this most dangerous weapon removed from the field of political and military forces. We know that in spite of all the good-will this effort did not succeed. Perhaps, things being as they are, it could not have succeeded. The menace, therefore, still hangs over us, like the sword of Damocles suspended by a thread. Perhaps, seen in a larger perspective, that may be a good thing. If the attempt had succeeded, the impression might have been created that everything was again all right with the progressive evolution of technicized humanity. It is precisely the failure of the attempt that needs to be understood as an indication of the fundamental nature of the evil, and consequently of the necessity of a fundamental, and not merely superficial, change of course.

I do not want, on the other hand, to fall into the opposite error and simply proclaim the necessity of a national conversion in the Christian sense—in the sense of ordinary evangelistic preaching. However right such preaching directed to personal conversion may be, it does not apply to what we have been here considering. We must view not only the sickness but also the remedy in the closest connection with the false development of the technicization of man. The word " conversion " must be given a meaning

which is related to this specific problem. Where this meaning has to be looked for cannot be in doubt in the light of the analysis. If the evil lies in the fact that means have become divorced from the service of ends, the remedy must be found in the re-instatement of them in that service. If that is to come about, however, two conditions must be satisfied—the end must be rightly conceived, and it must at the same time acquire the dynamic by which it can again make subservient to itself the means which have become autonomous.

Between means and ends there exists the same relation as between the thing and the person. Everything which is thing is a means, ends belong only to the personal life. The perversion of means into a false end is nothing but the de-personalization of life. The conversion by which means again become means and the person again becomes an end is consequently the *re*-personalization of life.

I must, however, try to remove at the very beginning two misunderstandings that may easily arise. Personal life is not simply individual life. Personal life transcends the opposition between the individual and the collectivity. The second misunderstanding goes perhaps deeper, and is possibly more difficult to get rid of. This is the misunderstanding of the personal as spiritual in contrast with material. An opposition between spirituality and materiality is as false as that between the individual and the collectivity. The personal life stands above the opposition of spirituality and materiality. These assertions will no doubt strike you at first as very strange. I must, therefore, explain more precisely what personal life is.

To live personally means to live in accordance with man's destiny, which finds expression in the Biblical statement that God created man in His own image. Man is a person not by nature nor through his spirit, but in virtue of his responsibility. Responsibility in its literal meaning must be understood as the necessity of answering the call which makes us responsible, that is the call of God. We are persons because we are responsible, the two mean exactly the same thing. We have our life not from ourselves but from Him who called us into life, and who in thus calling us desires an answer, which we have to give not with

words alone but with our whole existence—our entire life. The call moreover with which He calls us is the call of love. The content of responsibility, therefore, is love.

That is, in brief, the Christian idea of man as person. It is the only understanding of man that understands him as person, in such a way that the meaning of human life is precisely love, which as the call of the Creator makes us responsible. We can now understand why the three watchwords of modern man which we considered are false—freedom as independence, creativity without responsibility and power without reverence. The Christian faith is the precise opposite of all that in its understanding of the essence of man as person.

In the first place, in Christianity also the central concern is freedom. Only in freedom can a man answer to the call of the Creator. Only in freedom can man love God and neighbour. But this freedom is not independence, but on the contrary perfect dependence—dependence on Him who calls us into life.

Secondly, if life is understood in this way, what is primary is not creativity, but responsibility in love and for love. One does not become truly human through creativity, but through responsible love. The greatest man of genius can be quite inhuman, whereas one who loves responsibly is always truly human, even if his spiritual powers are not great, or if he is no genius nor even a person of talent.

In the third place, in this definition of what is human, the fact of power is not denied. But power is qualified from the very beginning by reverence in the presence of the Almighty who calls us. Even the power of man over nature is qualified by this reverence, and is consequently not liable to abuse. Above all, it can never become the will to power which aims at the domination of one's fellow men, since it is qualified by reverence before Him from whom all power comes, and to whom alone power in the last instance can be ascribed. That is the Christian understanding of man as person, and of the personal life. You will see at once that that is neither individualist nor collectivist. Responsible love is in the highest degree personal and in the highest degree communal, but incompatible with either individualism or collectivism. You will see also that neither the

opposition between spirit and matter nor that between spirit and body come into the picture. For it is man—with his bodily nature and set in a material environment—who is called to exercise responsible love, and it is precisely in the sphere of the material that this love has to be manifested.

Allow me here above all to emphasize one thing, which many of you will probably want to contradict. I have said nothing about Christian morality or indeed about morality and ethics in general. It is not possible to set aside faith in God and to hope to heal the evil of our time with morality and ethics. Quite on the contrary. It was the fatal mistake of the liberal and bourgeois society of recent centuries to suppose that there was an obvious morality or system of morals independent of faith, which could stand on its own foundation. It was this error of an autonomous ethics independent of faith that prepared the way for the false autonomy of the technical man and of technics. Morality apart from religion is the forerunner of irresponsibility, since true responsibility cannot exist without religion, that is to say, without faith in someone who makes us responsible. Morality without religion can, as I willingly concede, have for a time the justification of a reaction against a bigoted or morally sterile religiosity, but this justification is extremely transitory. Secular morality is always the offspring of a responsibility founded in a belief in God. It may last for a generation or two—then its power becomes exhausted and it passes over into irresponsibility.

It is my earnest conviction that nothing less than a return to the Christian faith in God can save us. But this return must be at the same time a new discovery. It is impossible for it to be merely a return to an existing tradition. It cannot be that, because what is required is to find the meaning of faith in God for the modern man—for men in the technical age. That meaning is one which only the man of the technical age can himself discover.

I come thus to the second point—that of the dynamic. Morality without religion has never manifested a dynamic. It is always something derived, never a source. It is like cut flowers in a vase, not a flower rooted in the soil and consequently able to

renew and reproduce itself, as the responsibility does which springs from living union with the Creator.

This faith, however, must not merely be preached from the pulpit. It must be a faith to which witness is borne by those who are in a special sense representative of our age—the men of science and technics. If you ask me what scientists and technicians can do to remedy our plight, all I can say—and I think it is sufficient—is: "You can, as the chosen spokesmen of this generation, more than any one else, do what our time most of all requires—you can be witnesses of this new understanding of the person and of this new personal life, which has its roots in Christian faith, and the seal of which is responsible love."

It is not in your power alone to re-incorporate the unbridled autonomy of technics into the context of human purposes, but —more than anyone else—you can help to bring about a reversal of the disastrous process by which technics have become inhuman, so that the way will be free for the new thing that is needed, namely, to make technics subservient to man and his true ends and the genuinely personal life. We theologians, who are preachers by profession, no longer have the ear of our generation. You possess it. What you can say to-day *can* be the decisive beginning of a new reformation. It *will* be this, if you say it with the force of conviction and the humility, which are the distinguishing marks of personal faith and in which there dwells an incomparable power. In these last years we have had experience of what immense and monstrous things a false faith is capable. It is for our generation to show to the world what a true faith can achieve. It was to say that to you and to appeal to you for that great service, that I have come from Switzerland. There is nothing more for me to do than to leave this appeal of mine in your hearts.

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